"I am praying that he will be . . able to do . . something for you," Luella said softly.

"That is what I am hoping," the Duke replied. "At the same time, he may not wish to become involved in anything so unpleasant."

Luella wanted to protest that no Italian who was decent would allow Signor Vecchio to behave in such an appalling manner. Then she thought to say so would only spoil the evening. It was, as the Duke had said, impossible for them to come to any conclusion until after putting the case to the Ambassador.

She therefore talked about pictures. She discovered that, in fact, the Duke knew a great deal about them. Although he had not visited as many countries as she had, they compared notes on quite a number of pictures they both admired. They sat at the dining-room table for a long time before they went into the drawing-room.

They had only just sat down to continue their conversation when the door opened. "Mrs Alcombe, Your Grace," the butler announced.

As she came into the room, Luella could not help thinking Mrs Alcombe looked exactly as a Christian worker would look.

"You must forgive me, Your Grace, for not coming sooner," she said to the Duke, holding out her hand, "but there was a meeting I was obliged to attend. It was about the propagation of the Gospel in the Far East."

"I am very grateful to you, Mrs Alcombe, for coming at such short notice," the Duke replied. "I can only express my regret at the inconvenience."

"It is always a pleasure to come here, Your Grace," Mrs Alcombe answered.

"Now let me introduce you to the young lady you are chaperoning," the Duke said. "Miss Luella Hanley, whose father was a distinguished author."

"So my brother-in-law told me," Mrs Alcombe said, "but I am afraid I have not read any of his books, as I have so much to read for the Church." She paused, and as no one said anything, she went on: "We are collecting a library of books that are suitable to send abroad to any missionary who requires them for his congregation."

"I have no doubt that will be a difficult task," the Duke remarked, "as of course most natives cannot read even their own language."

"That is so," Mrs Alcombe sighed. "Nevertheless, we must do our best to civilise the poor souls. And of course, a great number of them also require clothing."

Luella could not help being aware that the Duke's eyes were twinkling. But he said in a quite serious voice: "I feel sure no one can help these poor people better than you, Mrs Alcombe."

"That's what I like to think, Your Grace."

Because Luella was certain the conversation was boring the Duke, she rose and said she wanted to go to bed. Mrs Alcombe agreed. They said goodnight to the Duke and went up the stairs together. Luella found a maid who showed Mrs Alcombe to the room in which she was to sleep. Then she went to her own.

As she did so she thought how glad she was that Mrs Alcombe had been late in coming and had not